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Mercenaries Tell of Ghanaian Coup Plot

How did eight American soldiers of fortune think they and 100 native guerrillas could land on the coast of Ghana in rubber boats and overthrow Jerry Rawlings, president of the West African nation of 13 million?

Easy: They were convinced they had the official if secret backing of the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council. To their dismay, they learned otherwise after Brazilian authorities seized their Argentine-registered freighter on its way to Africa loaded with weapons last March.

As we've reported, the eight mercenaries, all Vietnam veterans, are now languishing in a Rio de Janeiro jail. They have, as the phrase goes, been hung out to dry by the shadowy individuals who suckered them into the cockamamie plot. The CIA has denied any involvement, and the man they claim recruited them says he did no such thing.

The story might strike some as funny, but it's no laughing matter to the eight Americans. Although the Brazilian charges against them were overturned by an appellate court, they remain in their vermin-infested cells awaiting a decision on their possible extradition to Argentina on charges of trafficking in contraband.

Details of the Rambo team's recruitment are provided in a diary written by one of the eight, Steve Hedrick.

Our reporters Corky Johnson and Robert Young have seen the diary and letters the prisoners sent to family members in this country.

Hedrick, a weapons expert in Vietnam, wrote that he was signed up by one Ted Bishop. At the first "team meeting" in Argentina, Hedrick wrote,

Bishop told the group: "You are being hired to overthrow the communist-backed government of Ghana. It's a joint effort between the U.S., Argentina and another unnamed country. This mission is sanctioned from the highest office in the country."

According to Hedrick, Bishop also told them: "I work directly for the NSC. I have walk-in access."

The Americans were to train a force of 100 Ghanaian rebels, apparently on board the freighter after picking them up off the Ivory Coast, which adjoins Ghana on the west coast of Africa. The invasion would be launched in rubber boats from the ship. Part of the Americans' mission was to rescue two CIA agents from a Ghanaian prison.

The leader of the amphibious operation was to be Godfrey Osei, a former Ghanaian official. According to our sources, he told the Americans that he had raised \$500,000 for the invasion, with the help of a supposed Israeli agent named Solomon and what Osei called the "Chinese Mafia" in New York City.

As luck would have it, neither Osei nor Bishop were aboard the arms-laden Argentine freighter Norbistor when Brazilian police seized it. Bishop told us he has never worked for any government agency. He acknowledged that he had helped arrange the arms deal for Osei, but denied having recruited the mercenaries for either the CIA or the NSC.

Compounding the Americans' unfortunate situation, they told their families, the U.S. Embassy in Brazil has done nothing to help them get better treatment from their jailers. The embassy denied the prisoners' charges.